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# THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN THE NATURAL AND THE SPIRITUAL ORDER AS DE- SCRIBED IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

## IV. THE CONFLICT WITH DESPIRITUALIZED RELIGION

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SHAILER MATHEWS

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In a preceding article we considered the reception accorded the message of Jesus by those who were already pre-disposed to the messianic calling. In the case of John and his disciples, as well as of the Samaritan Woman, the recognition of Jesus was hearty and almost immediate. In the case, however, of Nicodemus, a technically theological education made the perception of the true significance of Jesus difficult. Yet even in his case, no open breach with Jesus and his claims was reached. In the fifth chapter the gospel passes to the actual conflict waged by Jesus with the Pharisees. This conflict precipitated by him proceeds without compromise, although with occasional delay, until the authorities of Jerusalem plan his death.

As has been pointed out, the Fourth Gospel translates the messianic interpretation of Jesus into the terms of spiritual law. The messianic hope, as such, was ethnic and when held baldly could hardly be of philosophical value in the Greek or Roman world. With the Jews the opposite was true. The historical struggle between Jesus and the Jews, or "the world," was one in which his messianic dignity was in dispute. Particularly is this true of the account of the struggle contained in the Fourth Gospel. In the second section of that gospel, as in

the earlier, the evangelist pauses to comment upon the sayings of Jesus in such a way as to enable the religious mind of any time or place to equate his significance as seen from the point of view of messianism and from that of the claims of the spiritual order. The narrative of the conflict between himself and the Pharisees centers around several miracles in which the supernatural power of Jesus is exercised. These miracles are interpreted as "signs" of his messiahship by many individuals but arouse hostility on the part of the Pharisees, because of the same interpretation given them by Jesus.

The narrative of these events is constantly subjected to the evangelist's exposition. This exposition is interwoven with the narrative and is a chorus-like refrain upon the universal, spiritual significance of what Jesus is doing and saying. A little practice will enable the reader to recognize this expository material which makes up so large an element of the Gospel in the chapters under consideration. In later chapters such distinction between what might be called a logion or act of Jesus, and the evangelist's exposition becomes increasingly difficult and becomes at last quite impossible, so identified are the two elements of the Gospel.

Chaps. 5 and 7 present not a few

critical difficulties, particularly those of apparent disarrangement, but from the point of view of our present study, it is not necessary to reach a final decision as to just what was the original order of the material. The real purport of the narrative discloses itself without the aid of exact critical reconstruction, helpful as that is for detailed exegesis.

Here, as in the earlier portions of the Gospel, the struggle of Jesus with Pharisaism is used by the evangelist to illustrate the principles underlying the struggle involved in the effort of the spiritual order to express itself and through its representative to make followers among the representatives of the Jewish religion. "He came unto his own." These religious persons, however, are represented as having so despiritualized their religion and having so externalized the duties and tests of religion that the revelation of the spiritual order made by Jesus seems grotesque and blasphemous. Bitter opposition between them and Jesus immediately results and the Jewish religion thus comes to be regarded by the apostle as an element of "the world" (7:7).

The difference between such opposition and the spiritual obtuseness, born of the same technical theology, as shown by Nicodemus, is made clear in 7:45-53. Spiritual obtuseness in the case of "the teacher of Israel" was to be succeeded by open devotion (19:39) because it was accompanied by spiritual sincerity in a moment of investigation (7:50).

### **1. The First Issue between Jesus and Pharisaism: Externalized Religion**

The points of conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees were three. There is

first the struggle with the Pharisees occasioned by his breaking of their development of the Sabbath law. In the healing of the impotent man at the pool of Siloam on the Sabbath day, Jesus violates one of the fundamental religious positions of Judaism. For this he is at once censured. His defense of himself leads to (1) the exposition of his own significance as the representative of God and the eternal life; and (2) to his accounting for the fact that the Pharisees, leaders of God's chosen people, should turn from him and fail to see that he is the revelation of God. At every point in the development of this brief drama the evangelist adds his illuminating comment upon the spiritual significance of Jesus and the refusal of legalistic religion to believe in him.

Jesus vindicates his breaking of the Sabbath by the assertion that God is always active. He thus introduces a theistic conception destructive of deism, and of every form of belief in an external, absentee, inactive God. But this conception was less a shock to the religious leaders of his day than his speaking of God as his Father. For the divine immanence was not unknown to the rabbinical thinkers, but the divine paternity was conceived of by them either in terms of nationalism or in the materialistic mode of pagan mythology. The incapacity of a too literalistic religion to grasp the meaning of the spiritual reality which Jesus sets forth is at once evident. Here as in chap. 6 his hearers are represented as incapable of estimating the reality in the symbols used by Jesus. This inability prevents them from grasping the spiritual content of the Master's words and they are, there-

fore, still further shocked by Jesus' insistence that the position of the messianic Judge has been given him, as well as the power to bring the dead to life.

The claim of these two prerogatives of the messianic King marks the completion of the messianic self-assertion of Jesus. The evangelist, however, goes on to show, both by his own explanation and by the word of Jesus, the reasons for the failure of the world and the Pharisees in particular to see the messianic value in Jesus. In so doing he does not destroy or allegorize away the strictly eschatological content of the messianic instruction but makes the failure to recognize Jesus as the eschatological Christ a symptom of the unspiritual character of the world.

The entire discussion swings about eschatological expectations. The judgment, the resurrection, eternal life—all these are a part of the messianism of the current apocalyptic writings. But the Fourth Gospel is not content to leave the terms without real content. The judgment, it will be recalled, has already (3:18) been given a philosophical rather than dramatic meaning, and "eternal life," i.e., the sort of life that is to be lived in the Coming Age, is now identified with the spiritual life which the historic Jesus reveals—the injection of the life of the spiritual order into the natural order (7:38, 39; cf. 6:53-63). Thus to accept him as Christ is tantamount to entrance into the spiritual order; to reject him is to fight that order. And rejection is the inevitable outcome of the hostile attitude of the Pharisees.

Similarly in the case of the evidence on which Jesus relies for inducing men to take him as the Christ. This is said to

be John the Baptist, his works, his Father, and the Scriptures. Later, in 8:18, he relies upon two witnesses, himself and the Father, but the issue is the same. The rejection of evidence is a rejection of the spiritual order revealed in Jesus. The ultimate test of spirituality is seen in the response to the Father and to himself. This is clearly not an exclusively intellectual process but a volitional expression of a dominant attitude in life. Until one can respond to the spiritual appeal which God makes through Jesus, one will be hostile to him and without his presence in one's soul (5:33-43; cf. 5:23), a doctrine which has already appeared in the discussion with Nicodemus.

Thus the reasons for the failure of the Pharisees to recognize Jesus as the representative of God are details in the moral assault of the natural order upon Jesus, the representative of the spiritual order. Clearly these reasons are all moral: first, the determination of the Pharisees not to come to Jesus; second, their lack of love for God; third, their search for honor in religion (5:40-44). As over against this spiritual weakness, their reliance on Moses was of no value. In fact, Moses himself condemned them. Their confidence in him was only a part of their externalizing, despiritualizing of what Moses intended to be a deeply prophetic religion (5:46, 47).

## 2. The Issue over the Bread of Life

The second phase of the struggle is in the sixth chapter. It centers about the inability, born of moral failure, of the rank and file of the Jews to obtain food for the spiritual life. This is conditioned upon their inability to distinguish be-

tween the external in the work and person of Christ and the spiritual forces which he embodied, introduced, and illustrated. They recognize the one as miraculous but are offended when urged to see the latter. Thus a sharp and proper distinction is drawn between a perception of an event and the perception of the event's significance.

The episodes are the calming of the sea and the feeding of the five thousand, both conquests by Jesus of the natural order. But such conquests are intended to be regarded as "signs," not as mere accomplishments. The return of the multitudes for more bread—in itself a phase of what might almost be called a materialistic faith—leads Jesus to a discussion of the inability of material goods, even though they are given by God, to satisfy the spiritual needs of mankind. Men are not religious who accept blessings without seeing in them symbols of the higher, spiritual gifts of the Giver. The failure of many to appropriate the spiritual help which Jesus would give them is thus again attributed to moral weakness and wickedness. Faith must not stop with simply recognizing the actuality of supernatural power; it must rather see in such "works" signs which show the presence of the Divine in the midst of the material universe. Then there is a distinction between the material bread of heaven, i.e., manna, and the true bread of life, which is, of course, Jesus. The fact that the Jews do not see the meaning in his words, but, like Nicodemus, find in them only the occasion of new perplexities, is evidence that their minds are gross. The real Bread of Heaven is to be found in his words which are spirit. Whoever sees him as the

giver of this spiritual life, sees in him the supreme revelation of God to the world—the Bread of Heaven who has come down to be the Bread of Life to those who will accept it. The power to appropriate the religious life is the evidence of the existence of spiritual life within one. To reject it is evidence of absorption in the natural order (6:26-65).

### **3. The Attack of the Pharisees on Jesus**

The third phase of the conflict is the focalizing of hostility to Jesus by the leaders of the Jews. Thus begins the actual conflict so long accumulating. Jesus becomes a source of discussion among the people, many of whom regard him as the Christ (7:12,13). Men who are sent by the Pharisees to arrest him return unsuccessful, declaring that no man ever spoke like Jesus (7:4, 6).

The issue of the conflict is drawn sharply in the words of Jesus (7:16-19). His teaching was from God, as would appear to any man who would approach him in the spirit of Moses and without the pride of heart which was ruining the moral insight of the Pharisees. The determination of the Pharisees to lift the letter of the law above the spirit was the source of their inability to see the real meaning of Jesus' work (7:22-24).

The growing determination to kill Jesus may be seen running through the entire seventh chapter, and it is over against this that one must place the intense conflict of chap. 8, which culminates in the attempt of his enemies to stone Jesus to death. The eighth chapter intensifies the issues drawn in the three preceding chapters. On the one side Jesus appeals to the spiritual evi-

dence both of himself and of his Father, but the fundamental distinction he finally draws between himself and his opponents who are eager but afraid to kill him, is "Ye are from beneath. I am from above" (8:23). These words epitomize the entire philosophy of the Fourth Gospel. Jesus is from above and anyone who enters into relation with him from the world beneath must be born from above. If such rebirth do not come, men will die in their sins (8:24). His teaching is truth and the truth will make men free from the control of this lower world of the natural order (8:32), an emancipation which is never accomplished by descent from Abraham, since such a descent does not determine the moral life or the attitude of individuals toward the world of spiritual values which Jesus is revealing. The enmity which these descendants of Abraham exhibited toward Jesus is the evidence of their underlying sin and moral blindness (8:33 ff.).

This eighth chapter is of first importance in the gospel narrative, since it concentrates interest on the conflict over the very heart of the mission of Jesus, viz., the bringing of men of sympathetic and responsive hearts into the kingdom of God, the spiritual order in which truth and life both oppose and are opposed by

mere respectability, ethnic pride, insincerity, moral obtuseness, and legalistic self-complacency. In it Jesus is seen assailing the unspiritual forces that confront him, confident in the response of the really spiritual-minded to the appeal God is making to the world through him. The answering opposition of his opponents is in terms of the dominant quality of the natural order—"the world," viz., violence.

These great characteristics of the two opposing orders are increasingly evident in the following chapters of the Gospel. On the one side are the representatives of the world unresponsive to the spiritual appeal, seeking to overcome the representative of the spiritual order by violence, while on the other is Jesus reliant upon the ultimate triumph of the spiritual order but consistently carrying out his refusal (6:15) to rely upon any agent except the spiritual. This conflict develops as the representatives of the natural order grow desperate before the steady success of the work of Jesus; repeatedly they attempt to kill him but as often they find their attempts foiled.

In our next paper we shall see how the next stage of the conflict, in which the natural order triumphs, is interpreted in terms of universal significance.